

Testimony presented by Marcia DuFore
On behalf of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board
Before the Housing Committee

February 3, 2015

IN OPPOSITION TO:

PROPOSED S.B. 170, 409 AND H.B. 5583 AND 6144

AND IN SUPPORT OF:

S.B. 408

Senator Winfield, Representative Butler and distinguished Senators and Representatives of the Housing Committee,

My name is Marcia DuFore. I am writing to you as Executive Director of the North Central Regional Mental Health Board (NCRMHB). Our Board's responsibility is to study the mental health needs of people in our region and assist the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) with setting priorities for improved and expanded services to meet those needs. Our constituents include people who use mental health and addiction services (young and old), their families and concerned citizens in the towns and cities where services are delivered. Many of our constituents live in poverty and are in need of deeply affordable and supportive housing.

Our concerns for this legislative session are threefold: to protect individual liberties, preserve the safety net, and promote access to the services and supports necessary for people to lead lives in recovery from mental health and addiction challenges.

First of all, we want to express our respect and gratitude to members of the General Assembly and Governor Malloy for your recognition of the importance of and ongoing investment in affordable and supportive housing for some of our most vulnerable citizens - those who are elderly AND/OR disabled.

Connecticut has the sixth highest rental costs in the nation. There is a dire shortage of affordable housing in Connecticut - especially for extremely low income renters (those making 0-30% of the area median income). Many of those extremely low income renters are our constituents, people with mental health and addiction disorders who are at risk of chronic homelessness without your support. Some of them are elderly, but others are people with disabilities under 65 - a protected class under Connecticut statute and included within Connecticut's expanded definition of "elderly" since 1961. Any proposal for the expansion of state funded elderly housing that excludes people with disabilities goes against 50 years of Connecticut public policy and is discriminatory.

Our state must continue to invest in deeply affordable housing. It is the right thing to do; it is cost effective; and it prevents chronic homelessness and system gridlock. However, excluding people with disabilities from access to safe, decent, and affordable housing is not the way to increase access for older people. Instead we need to continue to invest in housing

opportunities for ALL people and support the expansion of support services that enable ALL tenants to live safely and use state funded housing for its intended purpose.

Pertinent to this issue of housing for the non-elderly is S.B. 408 which requires the Commissioner of Housing to develop a plan to ameliorate homelessness among youth. According to the 2013 Connecticut study, *Invisible No More*, many of these youth are our next generation of constituents. They are young people with significant mental health needs who are victims of or at risk for sexual assault, sex trafficking, and other high risk activities doing what they think they must just to survive on a day-to-day basis. Our current system is just beginning to understand their needs and has very little to offer in the way of outreach, crisis housing or support. We applaud your concern for these youth and strongly support the proposed bill to further study and devise strategies to address their needs.

Thank you for your time, attention, and interest in these matters,

Sincerely,

Marcia DuFore, Executive Director
North Central Regional Mental Health Board